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King of Hoaxers Deals His Jokers Like a Real Ace

Last week, in an article by Lois Mitchison, we saw the cream of Oxford and Cambridge practicing the ancient if not 100 per cent honorable art of the practical joke in England. This week the scene changes to the United States—and a Washingtonian who is the envy and ideal of practical jokesmiths the world over.

By Thomas Wolfe
Staff Reporter

THERE ARE STILL SOME nationally known journalists in Washington who will have their valets strike you (a journalist is a reporter who collects china and has a valet) if you mention the Ghost Artists Story. So let us dispense with the subject quickly and quietly and only by way of introducing Hugh Troy of 2531 Q st. nw., America's all-time free-style practical joke champion.

The episode began with an advertisement in The Washington Post of Feb. 5, 1952: "Too busy to paint? Call on The Ghost Artists, 1426 33d st. nw. Phone Michigan 2574. We Paint It—You Sign It! Primitive (Grandma Moses type), Impressionist, Modern, Cubist, Abstract, Sculpture . . . also, Why Not Give an Exhibition?"

The ad was just inconspicuous enough to excite the scoop hormones. Soon the wire service teletypes were rattling off such disclosures as:

"After thriving quietly for three years in New York, a fantastic new wrinkle in the art world—ghost paint-

Hugh Troy, king of the practical jokers, is a 225-pound 6 feet 5, which he corrects to "6 feet 4½ since I lost my hair."

ing—has moved to the Nation's Capital because of important clients high in the Government."

QUOTING AN ANONYMOUS spokesman, the stories went on to tell how the Ghost Artists, successful commercial artists in real life, were fattening up on commissions from executives who wanted to impress their friends or simply dilly-dabble in the artists-and-models life.

In the hours that followed, however, our Washington correspondents began receiving edgy queries from their New York offices. The panting gaiety of the early dispatches gave way to retching as the truth dawned. One by one—in messages such as the following, preserved in the files of The Washington Post—the news syndicates confessed that they had been had: WE ARE WITHDRAWING STORY ON GHOST PAINTERS WHICH WE ASKED TO BE HELD OVER LAST NIGHT FOR FURTHER CHECKING. SOURCE HAS REPUTATION OF BEING A PRACTICAL JOKER.

This happened to be a grave understatement. For the source was Hugh Troy, and Hugh Troy was nothing if not a notorious practical joker or a Leonardo among practical jokers, depending on whether or not you have been among the gulled.

Harpo Marx (in a ghost-written article, by the way) calls Troy "the most eminent practitioner of the art." H. Allen Smith devotes an entire chapter to Troy in his book "The Compleat Practical Joker" and entitles it, "Genius at Work."

TROY PRANKS have become a part of American folklore. It was Troy who had a park bench made, set it down by a walkway in New York's Central Park, waited for a cop to come by, picked up the bench and ran—and flabbergasted the judge by producing the bill of sale.

It was Troy who assured himself of a permanent parking place at his front door in Manhattan by carving a fire hydrant out of balsa wood and leaving it at the curb while he was away (a fire in the block finally exposed this one).

It was Troy who, while a mere college boy, panicked the city of Ithaca, N. Y., by cleverly "walking" a preserved rhinoceros hoof through the snow down to the edge of the city reservoir. (Half the city wouldn't drink water, it was said, and the other half swore they tasted rhinoceros.)

All these and literally scores more of Troy capers have been chronicled, analyzed and, in the ultimate form of flattery, imitated endlessly. Little wonder, then, that friends of the man are forever asking each other, "What *is* Hugh Troy up to these days?" Far from being idle conversation, the question usually brings all other conversation to a hush. For while Troy's mature or Classic Phase artistry is usually aimed at society-at-large rather than individuals, nobody wants to be in the ranks of the gullible when a Troy production is in progress.

TO FIND OUT JUST WHAT Hugh Troy *is* up to these days, we dropped by his apartment the other afternoon. Troy is a barrel-chested man of Pantagruelian dimensions, 6 feet 5 and 225 pounds. Nobody in Washington, however, invites you in with a gentler, kindlier show of good manners—partly, perhaps, to assure you that there is no bucket of water over the door.

For while big league pranksters like Troy, press agent Jim Moran and the late industrialist Brian G. Hughes would sooner be caught taking a wooden nickel than resort to the slapstick style of practical joke, their reputations dog them wherever they go.

"At parties, people come up and tell you, 'Do something funny.'" Troy mourned. "Buyers and publishers always used to suspect me of sneaking double images, nutty symbols or pictorial gags into my paintings. It's an awful reputation to have."

Troy's straight profession is author and illustrator of children's books, general illustrator and mural painter. Publishers have asked him to write his autobiography, concentrating on his life in jest.

"I couldn't begin to write a book like that," he said, looking more penitent by the minute. "I can't even bear to read about all those things in Allen's book (H. Allen Smith's "Compleat Practical Joker"). It embarrasses me. Besides, I've retired from the field."

But Mr. Troy, what about those cards we hear you sent out just the other Christmas?

Reluctantly, he owned up to the soak-well Christmas card gag, and it serves as a good example of what inspires Hugh Troy's talent for logical lunacy.

"I'd been getting more and more irritated with the Christmas cards people send out these days," he explained. "They have pictures of martini glasses, Buddhist scroll drawings, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, any damned thing as long as it's off the subject of Christmas."

Troy went to a local stationery store, bought a large supply of paper with a faint waterwark, had it cut and folded Christmas card-style. The outside of each card was left blank and the inside bore the printed message: "Soak in tepid water for five minutes. Hugh Troy."

Of the scores of friends he sent them to, some wrote back that their cards must have been defective because they had soaked it for hours on end (one soaked it for three days) and had gotten only some kind of watermark. Others said Santa Claus' head had begun to appear, but what about the rest of him? The response Troy liked best was a telegram he received Christmas morning from the radio comedian Col. Lemuel Q. Stoopnagle (the late F. Chase Taylor).

Arriving in Western Union's gay, green-and-red, holly-berry Christmas greetings envelope, it read: "GO SOAK YOUR HEAD."

TROY WAS ONCE INVITED to lecture on practical jokes at his alma mater, Cornell, and his message to the students was this: Don't act like college boys and sit down and decide to think up a practical joke. If you do, you will come up with something flat and mechanical, such as painting a red mustache on the Founder's Statue at Dartmouth. Circumstances have to inspire you. You have to seize the moment.

Troy's Ghost Artists stunt was a case in point. He was fed up with the prevalence of ghost-writing in the United States. American University had gone so far as to establish a course in it. The president of a leading university had been caught delivering an inaugural address which, courtesy of a lazy ghost writer, had been lifted word for word from an article by another university president in an educational review.

As with the Christmas cards, Troy decided to push a social trend clear over the cliff. Even after it was exposed for what it was, Troy's "Ghost Artists" inspired editorials on the ghost writing racket in newspapers throughout the United States.

Troy has directed his talents at individuals only when he found them unbearably pompous or, as in the case of British author Stephen Potter ("Gamesmanship: The Art of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating"), when he thought they had a sense of humor that would relish it.

TROY GAVE a party for Potter in his Georgetown home. The first guest who arrived, a young matron, headed immediately for Potter and said, "Oh, Mr. Potter, I've so enjoyed all your books, and won't you please autograph this one for me?"

Flattered, Potter took the book, reached for his pen, turned the flyleaf and found the title, "Upland Game and Gunning, by E. Runcey Potter." Not wishing to embarrass the woman, Potter signed it with an indistinct scrawl.

By this time, a second guest had entered. Like the woman, he greeted Potter with warm words of encomium and handed him a Potter book to sign —"The Lower Ganges Revisited, by Cokely Allerwart Potter, Bart."

On they came, more guests, each bearing a book—"I Was an Undercover Beatnik, by Rock Potter," "Senator Borah: Scourge or Good Samaritan? by Arthur Potter, Ph.D." "The Cumulous Blade of Being, by Cleanth Wetstone Potter," "Old Moroccan Flesh Mart Excavations, by Dr. Ali Potter-Amir," etc., etc.

Troy had planned the party weeks in advance, asking every guest to dig up a book by somebody named Potter—so long as it wasn't Stephen.

AMONG COLLECTORS OF practical joke lore, tradition has it that Hugh Troy is such a savant in the field that he has never been hoaxed himself. Troy revealed to us that this is not so. It is true, however, that he has gotten even with most of the rascals who took him.

Troy was first outplayed (to use a Stephen Potter term) by his sister. He was reading a geography primer one day when he came across the statement: "The Arctic regions are inhabited by the black bear, the brown bear and the great white also." He asked his sister what The Great White Also was.

She feigned surprise that he didn't know and said it was a monster who specialized in devouring little boys. For months thereafter she coerced him into doing all sorts of unpleasant things, such as washing his hands before dinner and going to bed on time, by warning him that if he didn't, The Great White Also would come after him.

Troy was 14 before he devised suitable retaliation. One day he began boasting about his new-found talent as a poet. He kept it up for days until his sister finally challenged him to produce one of his masterpieces for inspection or shut up. Troy put it in the form of a wager. He bet her three treats to the movies that if he sent one of his poems to the New York Times, they would print it.

Next day he hitchhiked to Auburn, N. Y., and mailed a letter to the Times Sunday Book Review's "Queries and Answers" editor: "I am anxious to find a piece of poetry, by an American, I believe, with some particularly moving stanzas about a gypsy maiden abandoned on the trail by her tribe. Titus Grigsby, Auburn, N. Y."

"T. G.'s" query was duly published. The following week, back in Ithaca, Troy wrote the Times the answer: "T. G. must be referring to the beautiful 'Curse of the Gypsy Mandolin' written in 1870 by the celebrated poet laureate of Syracuse, N. Y., Hugh Troy. G. Claude Fletter, Ithaca, N. Y." "Fletter" supplied the stanzas in question—also duly published by the Times:

"So we leave her
So we leave her
So we leave her
Far from where her swarthy kindred roam,
In the scarlet fever
In the scarlet fever
In the scarlet fever
Convalescent home."

AFTER GRADUATING FROM CORNELL—which barely withstood his four years there—Troy went to New York to make a name for himself as an artist. One of his friends was Theodor Seuss Geisel, now known to millions of parents and children as "Dr. Seuse," author and illustrator of children's books such as "The Cat in the Hat." The two entered into what Troy calls "a nutty feud."

When Troy left town one week in February, Geisel, in collusion with the janitor, sneaked into Troy's apartment, emptied several dozen packages of Jello, a bagful of cut fruit and half a dozen goldfish into the bathtub, filled it with water and opened the window to the winter air. Troy returned one bitter cold evening, stamped the snow off his shoes, went to the bathroom to draw a steaming tub—and found the world's largest frozen fruit-and-fish gelatin.

Troy's revenge took weeks. Geisel and his wife had just moved to a high-toned apartment house on Park ave. Their apartment shared a foyer with another across the way, but the two families had never met.

The Geisels often invited Troy over for supper. Each time, just before knocking on the door, Troy would decorate the foyer with a new object, always in the worst possible taste—a second-hand oak-stain table with uneven legs, a lamp with a ceramic base in the shape of a Turkish belly dancer, a bleary dimestore mirror, a Niagara Falls felt pennant and so on.

The Geisels thought their neighbors were responsible—and often commented to Troy about their boorish taste—while the neighbors blamed the Geisels. The Niagara Falls felt pennant was the last straw for the Geisels, and they complained to the building superintendent.

"That's funny," he told them. "Those other folks said the same thing about you. In fact, they called up the owners and asked them if they let just any old trash live here."

HUGH TROY SAYS HE FINDS it hard to understand why Washington, which seems so fat for the plucking, has inspired so few memorable practical jokes. He has heard of one, however, which quite frankly made him jealous, he confesses.

It seems that one of the more security-conscious Federal agencies set forth a regulation saying that any employe who happened to speak with any person under contract to a news medium (newspaper, television network, etc.) must report the gist of his conversation in memorandum form the next day.

One of the agency's middle-ranking officials was a personal friend of many Washington newsmen, lived next door, in fact, to a correspondent for a New York paper, and found it a useless burden to have to file the memos three and four times a week.

Hoping to needle the regulation out of existence, he began to file truthful but picayune reports on the order of: "Was approached late yesterday afternoon by John B——, under contract with the New York——, who inquired: 'Has our cat jumped over in your yard? We can't find him.' Replied: 'Haven't seen him, John.' Conversation terminated."

These had no effect, however, so he decided to pull out all the stops. His final report read:

"Was eating dinner last evening when a sharp rap sounded on the front door. Opened door and found a young man known as Leroy, under contract with The Washington Post & Times-Herald. Asked: 'What is it, Leroy?' He said: 'I've come to collect for The Washington Post.' Produced amount requested and said, 'Here you are, Leroy.' He said: 'Thank you, sir.' Conversation terminated."

Infuriated, his superior took the memorandum to the agency's top-level staff meeting. The man's long Government career hung in the balance—until the agency's director, unable to contain himself, exploded with laughter and toppled backward in his swivel chair. That was the last of the regulation.

BUT TO GET A TRUE IDEA of just how dearly Hugh Troy loves to see phonies, stuffed shirts and tin martinets cut down to size, consider this one he tells on himself.

A friend who ranked very high in the State Department asked him over to lunch one day, and Troy dressed to the nines, including vest and homberg. At luncheon's end, his friend graciously offered to have him chauffeured home in a State Department Cadillac.

Troy was settled comfortably in the back seat when the limousine stopped for a red light beside a bus load of touring high school students from Texas. Everybody on board was festooned with Pinocchio hats and plumes and sat sunken gum-deep in apple candy. One young man displayed a water pistol.

Spotting the silkhat-black Cadillac, he squirted a tentative trickle of water on the front windshield and enjoyed all the giggles.

The chauffeur looked around at Troy as if to say: "You can't tolerate a thing like that."

Troy adjusted his homburg, swung the back door open ponderously, leveled a forefinger at the students and orated: "I happen to be Sen. Radiant J. Lungburst of Texas, and if you hooligans are representative of the young men and women of Texas today, then it is time for our great state to hang its head in infamous shame!"

THE STUDENTS were shocked into silence at the sight of an enraged old dignitary who confronted them. But the genetic residue of Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett and Sam Houston suddenly sparked alive within the gunman. He let "Sen. Lungburst" have it full stream—all over the vest, the fine worsted suit, the silk shirt, the homburg, and flush in the mush.

As the light changed, Hugh Troy, dripping from homburg to bluchers, was still blustering at the top of his lungs: "You—you—I'll take this to the Legislature — I'll take this into the halls of the United States Senate itself —I'll ——"

Troy kept yowling, bystanders kept hooting and the boys and girls cheered their dead-eye outrider as the light changed and the duel became history.

"It was perfectly wonderful," Hugh Troy recalls. "Perfectly wonderful! You know, that kid will be a hero as long as he lives. He may grow up to be a wife beater, a snooker player, a lushwell, a dun dodger, a church shirker and an absolute leech on the welfare and good name of the community. But he'll never be a total failure. As long as he lives, he'll be remembered as the guy who put that pompous old ass in his place back in Washington, D. C., that day."

Sketches by Tom Wolfe, The Washington Post

The first show of Van Gogh's work at the Museum of Modern Art attracted so many people that none of them—including practical joker Hugh Troy—could get a decent look at the paintings. Troy suspected that most of the spectators were attracted more by Van Gogh's lurid reputation (he once cut off an ear and sent it to a prostiute) than by his work. Accordingly, Troy carved an ear out of a hunk of dried beef, mounted it in a velvet shadow-box with a highly descriptive placard, smuggled it into the museum and hung it on the wall. The result is shown above: there was soon plenty of space and Troy (upper right) enjoyed the paintings in peace.

Hugh Troy pulled his most enduring practical joke while in the Army in World War II. Tired of the endless paperwork, Troy mimeographed forms for Daily Flypaper Reports, detailing the number of flies trapped on each strand of flypaper in the mess hall and analyzing the results by wind velocity, nearness to windows, nearness to kitchen, etc. He slipped the Flypaper Reports in among sheafs of regulation ones and sent them to headquarters. Soon other units of the command began to catch hell for not sending in theirs, and the Daily Flypaper Reports became standard procedure. For all Troy knows, by the end of the war the Pentagon had made them regulation for all the armed forces.